her mother is to marry her daughter into a similar old aristocratic family of wealth and power. The Bellegardes are proud, strange and suave in their manners. But manners, James says, are not morals, and aristocratic birth is no proof of 'high civilisation'. James makes in *The American* a distinction between the 'natural aristocracy' of Newman based on merit and the 'artificial aristocracy* of the Bellegardes based on the accident of birth.[31] This contrast between dynastic aristocracy and individualistic aristocracy properly Americanises James's theme of refinement by relating it unconsciously to the Jeffersonian versus HamUtcnian discourse of the Natural Law, which is at the very root of the democratic self-image of American culture.

Valentin boasts of his noble ancestry and tells Newman that marriage between a French nobleman's daughter and an American businessman is impossible and unthinkable, for such an alliance imperils the honour of the family. Newman disagrees with Valentin; it is not birth which confers nobility on man but intrinsic refinement of character. He says, "But 1 say I am noble. 1 don't exactly know what you mean by it, but it is a fine word and a fine idea. I put in a claim to it".[32] Valentin, however, believes that Newman's millions might work wonders. The Bellegardes, noblemen as they are, are no proof against the temptations of Mammon. Newman is allowed to court Claire as a suitor. The Bellegardes treat him all along with furtive pride and cold civility. Newman is successful, and it is announced that Claire has favoured him. Claire's acceptance of Newman is viewed with disfavour by the mother and the elder son, who go back on their word to Newman that they would do nothing to antagonise Claire against him. Claire is coerced into giving up Newman, and he is informed that an alliance with a 'commercial person' is impossible in the context of their right to uphold their family dignity. Newman feels the impact of evil with all its force and loses his moral balance. He is intensely disappointed and frustrated, and

is furious with the
Bellegardes for their deception and hypocrisy.
Valentin, just before
his death, hints at a crime committed by his
mother and brother.
Newman wrests the secret from Mrs. Bread, bent
as he is on taking
revenge on the Bellegardes. The marquise and her
eldest son are
guilty of the murder of the father. The old marquis's
note accusing
his wife of murdering him falls into the hands of
Newman. Behind
the mask of manners and ceremony, Newman discovers
moral ugliness
and treachery. The so-called 'high civilisation'
bf aristocracy is
nothing but a gilded surface beneath which is hidden
foul corruption